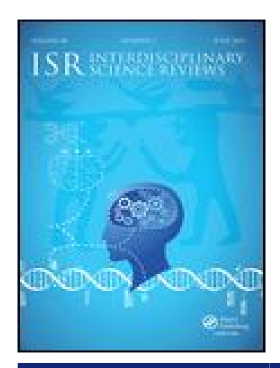




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The Complexity of Difference: Individual, Cultural, and Cross-Cultural*

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Difference is a basic fact in life and in our understanding of life. As individual human beings, we are all different from one another in genetic makeup as well as in physiognomic traits. Take a walk in the bustling streets of a city like Hong Kong, where I now live, you have human diversity thrust upon you as you find yourself in a motley crowd of Cantonese-speaking locals, Mandarin-speaking mainlanders, European expatriates, Filipinos, Thais, Indians and other south or southeast Asians, visitors or tourists from all corners of the earth, uttering a polyphonic heteroglossia or a spate of English of diverse accents. Such variety and marked differences make each of us identifiable as a person with distinctly personal characteristics as unique as our DNA sequences or our fingerprints. And yet, as social groups, communities, and nations, individual identities coalesce and people display certain in-group features that are common and shared by members of the same group while differentiating them from those of other groups. Language and ethnicity are examples of such socially constituted features, which become markers of collective identities; and as the study of collective identities often has more weight than that of individuals (for even the study of an individual, say, biography as a genre, must examine the individual in a collective or social context), group features, or differences on the collective level, are most likely to become the centre of activities in academic research, particularly in social sciences and the humanities. In other words, critical attention in scholarly discourse tends to focus on cultural differences, culture being the term for a community's collective ways of living, the form of life in a particular society. As a result, cultural differences stand out prominently, while individual differences are often obscured, even though they may be just as important in our lives.

Ethnography, which aims at the study of cultures, usually cultures of other groups than the ethnographer's own, is predicated on the understanding and interpretation of cultural differences. According to George Marcus, ethnographers traditionally believe that cultural difference 'can be fully *consumed*, that is, assimilated to theory and description by cracking codes of structure, through better translation, and so forth'. In this postmodern age of ours, however, the idea of 'radical or surplus difference' comes to dominate the field 'with the premise that difference can never be fully consumed, conquered, experienced'. The prominence of difference is now the distinct

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mark of postmodern ethnography. 'In any attempt to interpret or explain another cultural subject', says Marcus, 'a surplus of difference always remains' (Marcus 1998, 186). The emphasis on cultural difference thus assumes a paradigmatic role in ethnography or cultural anthropology, and that is indicative of what happens in many other fields and disciplines as well.

In this connection, we may understand why Thomas Kuhn's idea of incompatible paradigms has exerted such a huge influence far beyond the study of the history of science, and why his concept of radical incommensurability has so often been borrowed in discussing cultural differences. Indeed, Kuhn himself draws an analogy between scientific revolution and political revolution. 'Like the choice between competing political institutions', he remarks, 'that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life' (Kuhn 1970, 94). Different paradigms, he further argues, are 'not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable' (103). Scientists working under different paradigms not only have different standards and definitions, ask different questions, give different interpretations, but they 'practice their trades in different worlds', which Kuhn considers to be the 'most fundamental aspect of the incommensurability of competing paradigms' (150). If scientists working under different paradigms live in different worlds of mutual incomprehension, such an idea of incommensurability easily offers a model for social sciences and the humanities to look at different cultures as radically incommensurable worlds.

As Kuhn's ideas circulate in general discourse in the study of cultures, incommensurability quickly becomes a theoretical notion that serves not only to emphasize difference, but also, and unfortunately, to legitimize the segregation of social groups and communities. The concept may mirror social reality already in place; it may also exert certain influence on how people perceive reality and thus help create such a reality. In any case, as an influential concept, incommensurability has its consequences. It becomes a paradigmatic idea in what Lindsay Waters dubbed the 'Age of Incommensurability'. It functions, as Waters complains, as 'justification for a resurgent tribalism' (Waters 2001, 144). In its worst form, it even fosters 'a blinkered, absolutist, nonpluralist relativism' (145). Incommensurability thus gives theoretical endorsement to a radical relativism, the dubious idea of mutually incomprehensible cultures and societies. Particularly in the humanities and social sciences, such a conceptual relativism predominates in much of academic discourses, especially in understanding different cultures and alien societies.

Influential as they are, Kuhn's ideas have nevertheless given rise to controversies and met with a good deal of criticism. Hilary Putnam argues, for example, that Kuhn's concept of incommensurability 'seems to signify nothing more than intertheoretic meaning change, as opposed to uninterpretability'; and he questions whether scientists under different paradigms really have no common language or common measurement to gauge the change of meaning. The Copernican heliocentric and the Ptolemaic geocentric astronomers certainly shared the same language in which they debated with one another on the nature of the universe and presented their different views.

'When two theories conflict, then, although the common theoretical terms generally have different meanings', says Putnam, 'that does *not* mean that there is no "common language" in which one can say what the theoretical terms of both theories refer to' (Putnam 1990, 127). Donald Davidson points out an inherent difficulty of the relativist paradigm. 'The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox', says Davidson. 'Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability' (Davidson 2001, 184). It is ironic that cultural relativists, who maintain that language, cognition, and knowledge are all generated within the system of one culture and do not obtain across cultures, nonetheless claim to have cross-cultural knowledge about fundamentally different and incommensurable cultures.

In response to his critics, Kuhn tried in his later years to modify his earlier claim and redefined incommensurability as 'a sort of untranslatability, localized to one or another area in which two lexical taxonomies differ'. Such a localized linguistic incommensurability does not, he insists, 'bar intercommunity understanding. Members of one community can acquire the taxonomy employed by members of another, as the historian does in learning to understand old texts' (Kuhn 2000, 93). But if that is the case, then, to equate incommensurability with untranslatability would hardly make sense. Historians certainly can find ways to understand and translate texts of the past. 'Instead of living in different worlds', as Davidson comments dryly, 'Kuhn's scientists may, like those who need Webster's dictionary, be only words apart' (Davidson 2001, 189). In other words, we may question whether Kuhn's redefined notion may still hold on to the concept of incommensurability. The real problem is, however, that Kuhn's redefined notion, though meant to modify his earlier and more radical claims, comes a bit too late to curb the circulation of the concept of incommensurability or its relativist interpretations in the discourse of social sciences and the humanities. As a result, Kuhn's notion helps create the relativist paradigm in the study of cultures.

The idea that different social groups or communities have nothing in common and cannot be brought into comparison for mutual illumination proves to be especially entrenched when it comes to the understanding of non-Western cultures. Of course, the opposition of West and East, Europe and Asia, or Greece and China, long predates Kuhn's work and the popularization of the idea of incommensurability, and the emphasis on difference has a long history in Western discourse on the non-European Other with different motivations and consequences. Much of that history illustrates the difficulty of cross-cultural understanding and shows the tenacity of what I have called the 'myth of the Other'.[1] Sometimes, as with the French poet and Sinophile Victor Segalen in the early twentieth century, a culturally exotic China with all its peculiarities and differences is indispensable for the possibility of poetry and the appreciation of exotic beauty. 'Exoticism', says Segalen, 'is nothing other than the notion of the different; the perception of diversity; the knowledge that something is not oneself' (Segalen 1978, 23). In contemporary

theories, however, the emphasis on cultural difference is more a matter of conceptual or epistemological contrast than aesthetic sensibilities.

Perhaps nothing is more exotic than Michel Foucault's mind-boggling '*heterotopia*', an unthinkable space generated by an incomprehensible 'Chinese encyclopaedia' and its illogical way of classifying animals. In the preface to *The order of things*, Foucault quotes from Borges's essay on John Wilkins a most curious passage of animal classification, which defies any logic, but that strange passage does not come from any real 'Chinese encyclopaedia'; it is a fictional piece created by Borges himself, who does not, however, mean to use it to symbolize an incomprehensible exotic system of thought. And yet, Foucault takes it to be genuinely Chinese and representative of the way the Chinese mind operates, which threatens to 'collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other', casting a spell, an 'exotic charm of another system of thought', while showing 'the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*' (Foucault 1973, xv). In Foucault's description of such a bizarre 'Chinese way of thinking', a totally different system is constructed to set off the normality of European thinking, the *epistemes* or cultural codes of a familiar system. That strange classification is so illogical and so impossible to conceive that it can only inhabit, according to Foucault, the unthinkable '*heterotopia*', a conceptual place fundamentally different from the Western fantasy of a Utopia.

Another significant example of China as a symbol of fundamental difference is Jacques Derrida's use of Chinese writing as the opposite of Western phonetic writing, which embodies 'logocentrism' or the 'metaphysical hierarchy' of thinking, speech, and writing. 'Logocentrism', the debasement of writing and the elevation of the voice in speech, the loss of which the alphabetic form of writing tries to recuperate, says Derrida, 'is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning' (Derrida 1976, 11–12). In Western thinking about language, therefore, there is an entrenched tradition of the debasement of writing, the prejudice against the inadequacy of language, particularly in the form of writing. Derrida insists that logocentrism in its 'original and non-"relativist" sense' is 'an ethnocentric metaphysics. It is related to the history of the West' (79). Based on Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, he understood Chinese written characters as forming a totally different system of writing unrelated to the speaking voice. The 'largely nonphonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese', he declares, can stand as 'the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism' (90).[2]

Now neither Foucault nor Derrida is a Sinologist; nor are they concerned with the understanding of China as such when they made those claims about the Chinese language and thinking. And yet, they all use China or Chinese writing to contrast with the West, and to highlight cultural differences as some sort of an impossible place as '*heterotopia*' or the ultimate '*différance*'. Given their tremendous influence in social sciences and the humanities, the East–West dichotomies they set up offer a model in thinking about China as the opposite of Europe. Indeed, in Sinology and Asian studies in general, as in ethnography discussed earlier, the relativist emphasis on cultural difference

assumes a paradigmatic role. More than 10 years ago, David Buck as editor of the American *Journal of Asian Studies* already stated in his introduction to a forum on universalism and relativism that 'relativist interpretations are advanced with much more frequency among Asianists, and indeed in the *JAS*'s pages, than universalist ideas' (Buck 1991, 32). Having looked at various forms, Buck comes to the conclusion that relativism is basically a sceptical view on 'the issue of whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid' (30). In other words, most Asianists are sceptical about the availability of conceptual tools that can be useful 'across the boundaries of language, geography, culture, and time' (29).

More recently, Richard Nisbett has given the relativist paradigm yet another strong affirmation when he focuses on 'Asians' and 'Westerners' and their fundamental differences. 'Human cognition is not everywhere the same', says Nisbett.

> First, that members of different cultures differ in their "metaphysics", or fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world. Second, that the characteristic thought processes of different groups differ greatly. Third, that the thought processes are of a piece with beliefs about the nature of the world: People use the cognitive tools that seem to make sense — given the sense they make of the world. (Nisbett 2003, xvi–xvii)

According to Nisbett, people differ as social groups, for these groups hold different belief systems and their 'thought processes' differ collectively. Here, incredibly large groups (all Asians and all Westerners) are said to think and behave in collective and fundamentally different ways, thereby cultural differences are highlighted in a clear-cut East–West dichotomy with no room for individual variations.

It is in the context of such an intellectual climate — the predominance of a relativist paradigm that puts an overemphasis on cultural difference — that we may come to fully appreciate the significance of Geoffrey Lloyd's work that tries to bring some sense and balance to the current situation of scholarship. As it often happens in theoretical discourse, a valid point tends to develop till it turns into its opposite by going to the invalid and unhelpful extreme. Against the false universalism of the colonialist or imperialist times, when European concepts and standards were used as universal measurements to judge non-European cultures and found them lacking, the emphasis in our times on cultural difference and the internal validity of value systems makes a lot of sense morally, politically, and philosophically. To deny the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, however, and to insist on the incommensurability of the East and the West only lead to the other extreme of the isolation of cultures and the danger of a clash of civilizations. In emphasizing the fundamental differences between Asians and Westerners, Nisbett clearly sees that possible danger, but he accepts it as something unavoidable. 'If people really do differ profoundly in their systems of thought', says Nisbett in a sober-minded vein, 'then efforts to improve international understanding may be less likely to pay off than one might hope' (Nisbett 2003, xvii–xviii). Given the conflict we find in much of our

world today, the question is: Do we need to try to improve international or cross-cultural understanding despite all the difficulties? To acknowledge the difficulty is one thing, but to give up the effort is quite another.

To reduce the tendency towards such extremisms, the first thing in order should be an effort to avoid simplistic collective categorization in the study of cultures and societies. In this regard, we may appreciate the methodological value of Lloyd's critique of Lévy-Bruhl's concept of collective mentalities. In attributing a shared mentality to a social group, even an entire nation, such a crude differentiation of peoples into rigid mental phalanxes 'always risks ignoring or playing down individual variations. Collectivities do not think, only individuals do', as Lloyd argues, 'but it is not that *any* group, *any* society consists of individuals with entirely uniform mental characteristics' (Lloyd 1990, 5). To pay attention to the 'individual variations' within a supposedly homogeneous mentality is crucial for recognizing the richness and diversity of a cultural tradition. The problem with cultural relativism is that it overemphasizes cultural or cross-cultural differences while ignoring individual ones; that it minimizes differences within cultures so that differences between cultures can be pushed to the foreground.[3] What comes out of such sweeping generalizations is often a simplistic caricature that presents a distorted picture of a culture rather than an approximation of its reality. If we are serious about paying attention to differences, we should pay as much attention to individual differences as we do to group and collective ones.

Another significant aspect of Lloyd's work is his effort to bring the cultural tradition of ancient China into comparison with that of ancient Greece. Given the overemphasis on cultural difference, China and Greece are mostly kept apart in much of modern scholarship, and if they are brought together at all, they are often put in a sharp contrast to highlight the differences these two traditions are supposed to exemplify. François Jullien, for instance, repetitively uses China as a negative mirror to look for what Europe is not, and his method is always to put China and Greece in a mutually exclusive opposition. 'Indeed, if one wants to "go beyond the Greek framework", and if one searches for appropriate support and perspective', says Jullien, 'then I don't see any voyage possible other than "China-bound", as one used to say. This is, in effect, the only civilization that is recorded in substantial texts and whose linguistic and historical genealogy is radically non-European'. Using Foucault's '*heterotopia*' as conceptual frame and the idea of Far East as non-Europe, Jullien declares that 'strictly speaking, *non-Europe* is China, and it cannot be anything else' (Jullien 2000, 39). Jullien often draws up two columns of contrastive values or categories, one Greek and the other Chinese. Those contrastive columns, however, have more to do with Jullien's methodology than with Greek or Chinese thought and culture as such, for it is his contrastive argument that turns his image of China into the reverse of Greece, so much so that whatever he finds in China is very predictably the opposite of Greece, thus always an unfailing confirmation of fundamental cultural differences.

Against such crude contrastive outcomes, we find Lloyd's views much more nuanced and balanced. Lloyd sees both Greece and China as richly

diverse in their respective development of thought and culture. These two traditions are certainly different in important ways, but they also have significant similarities that make it impossible to reduce everything to an absolute dichotomy. It is 'not just hazardous but often downright misleading', says Lloyd, 'to generalise about Greek thought, culture and politics, ignoring the immense diversity within the philosophies proposed, the scientific work undertaken, the political systems developed in theory and in practice, at different periods'. And it is just as misleading and 'clearly impossible', he continues, 'to advance generalisations valid for the whole of Chinese history or for the totality of the many diverse traditions of thought exemplified in Chinese culture' (Lloyd 1990, 106). At the same time, Lloyd does not play down cultural differences, but he acknowledges them where appropriate. Greek mathematics as exemplified by Euclid, for example, proceeds by deductive operations 'from a single set of indemonstrable but self-evident axioms', but such axiomatic-deductive demonstration was 'quite foreign to Chinese mathematics right down to modern times, that is until after the translation of Euclid undertaken by the Jesuits and their followers' (Lloyd 2004, 29). Likewise in the study of medicine, important differences are not to be overlooked: 'where the Greeks generally focused on the study of structures and organisms, in China the emphasis was more often on processes, on interaction, on resonances' (30). Even today, these are still conspicuous differences, for Western medicine and the biomedical and pathological theories underlying medical treatment are quite different from the Chinese practice of acupuncture, herbal medicine, and their theoretical justifications. These important differences between China and Greece would put any simplistic universal claim into question.

Differences are a matter of degree, however, not of kind, and more or less understanding and communication have always worked across linguistic and cultural gaps. As Lloyd puts it:

> Empirically, there is no human society with which communication has proved to be totally impossible, however hard mutual understanding — always imperfect, to be sure — may sometimes be to attain. Logically, if indeed we are confronted with a conceptual scheme that is incomprehensible in our terms, then we cannot, by definition, make any sense of it. (Lloyd 2004, 40)

That is to say, if things are really incommensurate, then, no one can even make the claim that they are incommensurate, because to make such a claim presupposes that one knows both sides of the dichotomy and knows them to be truly incommensurate, and yet, such cross-cultural knowledge is precisely what the incommensurability argument precludes and denies. By pointing out this logical difficulty, we can effectively dislodge the incommensurability argument.

Cognitive variations, the most recent of Lloyd's books, is impressive in dealing with a wide range of topics from colour perception, spatial cognition, animal and plant classifications, to such less determinable issues as emotions, sense of health and well being, self and agency, the nature–culture dichotomy, and the question of rationality (Lloyd 2007). Lloyd gives each of these subjects a detailed discussion, based on readings of a large amount of

scholarship from social anthropology, linguistics, history, philosophy, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, neurophysiology, and several areas of cognitive science. The central issue is again the question of whether in all these different disciplines we can detect cross-cultural universals or the predominance of cultural relativities, and in his discussion of all these issues, Lloyd not only examines contemporary scientific studies for the insights they offer as well as their limitations, but he also draws on historical arguments in ancient Greece and ancient China to throw light on modern debates. In all these different areas of human cognition, there is what Lloyd calls the 'multidimensionality' of data or phenomena, of positions, perspectives, methodologies, styles of enquiries, etc., so much so that in each and every case, we realise that neither the universalist nor the relativist has the monopoly of truth. The problem with both universalist and relativist claims is that they only recognize collective identities without proper consideration of individual variations, that they either see no difference between cultures, or see nothing but cultural differences. The truth is that the complexity of difference, i.e. the presence of difference on various levels, makes any simple generalization invalid. Difference exists not just collectively between cultures and groups, but also individually among people within the same culture or the same group.

The multidimensionality of things or the complexity of difference can help us detect the limitations of both the universalist and the relativist positions. Individual differences obviously make universal claims difficult to sustain as each member of the same group or cultural tradition differs from the other members. Individual and group differences also make cultural relativist claims untenable as differences are not just between one culture and another, but between groups within the same culture. For example, S.C. Levinson shows that in locating objects in space, there are basically three distinct frames of reference — the intrinsic, the relative, and the absolute. That is reasonable enough, but what becomes problematic is the claim that 'the acquisition of one or other frame of reference is strongly influenced by culture in general and by language in particular' (Lloyd 2007, 24). The use of linguistic determinism of the Sapir and Whorf kind, or what Levinson calls a neo-Whorfian approach, creates a problem because difference in spatial orientation does not fall neatly along linguistic lines, and people sharing the same language and culture may use different frames of reference in locating objects or orienting themselves.

As Lloyd observes:

> There was no uniformity among the ancient Greeks on several problems concerning space, place, and the void, and on the relations between them, including on the question of whether it makes sense to talk of up and down, right and left, with regard to the cosmos as a whole. This already suggests that on those questions, at least, the Greek language, used by all the participants in those debates, certainly did not dictate determinate solutions to the problems. (Lloyd 2007, 29)

Likewise in China, there is no uniformity on the issue of spatial cognition, because people in the north mostly use an absolute frame of reference in locating objects in space, while most southerners use a relative frame of

reference; yet both northerners and southerners largely share the same language and culture.

The difference between the north and the south often plays a significant role in China. As early a text as the ancient *Book of rites* already states that 'what is considered strong in the south is tolerance, not taking vengeance for wrongs', but 'what is considered strong in the north is being equipped with weapons and leather armours and not shrinking from death' (Ruan Yuan 1980, 1626b). In Chan Buddhism as in traditional Chinese painting, the northern and the southern schools are clearly differentiated. 'To relate geographical areas like the "south" and the "north" with two distinct modes of thinking or styles of learning', says Qian Zhongshu, arguably the most erudite scholar in modern China, 'can be found as early as in the Six Dynasties (420–589), and the division of Chan Buddhism in the Tang dynasty (618–907) into the southern and the northern schools matched or closely followed the old ideas in the Six Dynasties' (Qian 1985, 9). This north–south differentiation is certainly true of spatial cognition as well. When asking a northerner for directions in China, you will be told to go north, south, east, or west, and an absolute frame of reference is used, but in the south, a relative frame is used to direct you to go straight or turn left or right, using some landmark as a point of reference. The same language is used in all these cases, and frames of reference are not mutually exclusive, either, as some combination is possible by either northerners or southerners. The Sapir and Whorf thesis of linguistic determinism is erroneous because, as Lloyd remarks, 'we often find divergent views expressed in the same language by different members of the same society' (Lloyd 2007, 174). Here again, individual variations are always possible, and generalizations on a collective basis can tend to mislead. 'China is not a mass of self-enclosed atomic facts but vast regions and networks of human experience', as Benjamin Schwartz reminds us. 'The universalistic claims of externally imposed paradigms must be constantly and mercilessly exposed to the complexity of concrete experience, which may challenge the paradigms themselves' (Schwartz 1996, 5). The concrete experience of individuals is always variable, though we must also realise that individual flexibility is confined within limits of the range of possibilities available in a particular group or society.

Let me conclude by returning to ethnography and the understanding of different cultures. A joke about ethnography has it that the ethnographer, coming back from field work in a remote land, reports that the language of the exotic tribe he has visited has only one word. It turns out that the word means 'finger', for every time he pointed at something with his finger and asked what it was, the native informant answered, correctly, 'finger'. As good ethnographers know, jokes are often revealing, and given the presumption that the exotic people must be fundamentally different from us, the joke's point is precisely to demystify ethnography's presumption of a 'surplus of difference'. It is unthinkable that *our* language has only one word, but it becomes conceivable to describe the language of the Other as having just one word, as the ethnographer expects that language to be fundamentally different from *our* own, unthinkable in *our* terms. As Renato Rosaldo maintains, to judge the adequacy of an ethnographical report, a plausible

criterion could be 'a thought experiment: how valid would we find ethnographic discourse if it were applied to ourselves?' (Rosaldo 1987, 90). Here the underlying assumption is of course the shared humanity among different peoples with different cultural values and belief systems. 'Despite the indeterminacy of translation and the real problems of "culture-boundedness"', again as Schwartz argues, 'it is possible to grasp the concerns which lie behind the discourse of other cultures. Difference is ever present but it is not ultimately inaccessible' (Schwartz 1996, 7). Differences make all of us distinct as individuals, as groups, communities, and nations, but despite and beyond all the differences, we share the same globe as human beings and as neighbours. The universalist's denial of individual and cultural differences obviously gives us a false picture of the world, and the relativist's insistence on all difference without similarity equally distorts the true condition of our world, the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and co-operation. The reality is always more complex than such an either/or dichotomy would lead us to believe, and we would do better to choose to know the complexity of reality than to believe in the false picture of either all unity or total difference.

Notes

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1 Since the time of Marco Polo (c. 1254–1324) and particularly Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), China has been understood differently in the West and the image of China has played different roles in European imagination and self-understanding. What becomes important for our time, I argue, is the demythologizing of China for real cross-cultural understanding (Zhang 1998, 19–54).

2 Insofar as the Chinese written characters are concerned, however, Fenollosa and Pound are unreliable and patently misleading. In the Chinese philosophical tradition, the inadequacy of language, and in particular the debasement of writing, have a long genealogy and many articulations. The Greek word *logos* contains the duality or tension between speaking and that which is spoken, and that hierarchic relationship forms the basis of Derrida's naming of the Western tradition 'logocentrism'. By an interesting and perhaps revealing coincidence, the word 道 (*tao*) in Chinese also signifies both speaking and that which is spoken, and the 'logocentric' idea of language incapable of fully expressing what it is supposed to mean is clearly expressed in such classic works as the *Tao te ching*, which begins with the statement that 'the *tao* (often translated as Way) that can be spoken of (which in the original is also *tao*) is not the constant *tao*'. In other words, *tao*, the 'Way', or whatever is considered the highest in philosophical or religious thinking, is ineffable and beyond language. The 'metaphysical hierarchy' of thinking, speech, and writing thus exists in China as it does in the West. That is the main thesis in my critique of Derrida for setting up an absolute East–West dichotomy (Zhang 1992).

3 This is the problem with Nisbett's ignoring the distinction between one individual's personal opinion and that of an entire community or even all 'Asians'. He started his book with an anecdotal account of what 'a brilliant student from China' told him: 'You know, the difference between you and me is that I think the world is a circle, and you think it's a line'. That student went on to explain and said:

> The Chinese believe in constant change, but with things always moving back to some prior state. They pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think you can't understand the part without understanding the whole. Westerners live in a simpler, more deterministic world; they focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger picture; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behaviour of objects. (Nisbett 2003, xiv)

Apparently, that student from China is not that 'brilliant' after all, for he has no idea that circle, reversal, and return are often discussed in the West. 'The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second', says Ralph Waldo Emerson in a well known essay entitled 'Circles'. For Emerson, circle or circular movement is 'the primary figure', 'the highest emblem in the cipher of the world' (Emerson 1983, 403). Circle is the symbol not only of the world, but of the life of man as well. 'The life of man', Emerson continues to argue, 'is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end' (404). Again, that student has no idea that 'you can't understand the part without understanding the whole' is by no means uniquely Chinese, because it is what the 'hermeneutic circle' in the German tradition is all about. And yet, for Nisbett, this one person's ill-informed view not only represents the views of all Chinese, but of all Asians. As there are millions and millions of Chinese and Asians, it is obviously misguided to take one individual's opinion as collectively valid. We cannot ignore individual differences and subsume them under group or cultural differences.

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